



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

## Countering Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan

**Citation for published version:**

Voller, Y 2014, 'Countering Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan: State-Building and Transnational Advocacy', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 329 - 349.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814000142>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1017/S0020743814000142](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814000142)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

International Journal of Middle East Studies

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# Countering Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan: State-Building and Transnational Advocacy

Yaniv Voller

Yaniv Voller is a Leverhulme Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, U.K.; e-mail: [yvoller@ed.ac.uk](mailto:yvoller@ed.ac.uk)

## Abstract:

The struggle against gender-based violence in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has witnessed some significant achievements since the late 1990s. A subject long excluded from public discourse in the region, it has now moved increasingly into the mainstream, compelling the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to take legal and practical measures against such practices as honor killings, female genital mutilation, and domestic violence. This article traces the sources of these shifts in the KRG's stance, looking especially at the consistent advocacy by transnational women's rights networks in the region. It highlights their successful strategy of binding their cause to the KRG's endeavor to legitimize and consolidate its contested sovereignty over the Kurdistan Region. By doing so, this paper addresses this underexplored subject in the literature on women's rights campaigns in the Kurdistan Region, and contributes to the study of transnational advocacy as a source of normative change.

The formation of de-facto Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq in 1991 was a momentous event in contemporary Kurdish history.<sup>1</sup> For the first time the Kurds of Iraq obtained nearly full control over parts of the territory they historically claimed. A new peak in the long and bloody Kurdish nationalist campaign for self-determination in Iraq, the emergence of this Kurdish de-facto state served as a platform for another struggle, that of Kurdish women. From the foundation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Kurdish women's rights activists lobbied it to integrate women into public life and protect their rights.

A central theme in this campaign has been to push for government action against gender-based violence, especially honor killings of women by relatives for alleged extramarital relations, and female genital mutilation (FGM). Women's rights networks in Kurdistan have invested

tremendous efforts in lobbying the KRG to counter and eliminate such practices, and have made some important gains, particularly since the early 2000s. While in the early 1990s the subject of gender-based violence was rarely discussed openly in the region, during the second decade of Kurdish de-facto autonomy in the 2000s, the subject emerged in the forefront of public debates in the region. Furthermore, during this period the Kurdish leadership began taking steps to counter violence against women, first with legislation and then gradually through action on ground.

The interest of social scientists in gender-based violence in the Kurdistan Region has increased in recent years. Some have documented the changing patterns of gender discrimination and the exclusion of women from the Kurdish public sphere, as well as the evolution of women's participation in the Kurdish political field.<sup>2</sup> Others have addressed the relationship between Kurdish nationalism, in both the Kurdistan Region and diaspora, and feminist activism. Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, for example, in their examinations of feminist activism in the Kurdistan Region, have refuted the tendency to view feminism as necessarily incompatible with nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Works by Andrea Fischer-Tahir and Karin Mlodoč have analyzed the relationship between gender and political violence in the Kurdistan region, exploring events such as the Anfal, the genocidal campaign launched by the Ba'ath regime during the late 1980s against the Kurdish population.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, recent studies have highlighted the transnational nature of the campaign against gender-based violence in the Kurdistan Region. Particularly notable in this trend has been the work of Shahrzad Mojab on the emerging transnational nature of women's rights activism in the region and its impact. In one study, Mojab has documented the influence of cyberspace and new communication technologies in fostering the exchange of information and consequently new forms of activism. Through her own experience, she notes that online forums have become important tools for feminist activists and scholars in the Middle East, especially those who face

censorship in their countries, enabling them to communicate with each other and with activists and scholars from elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> In other works, Mojab has highlighted the role played by the Kurdish diaspora in the increasingly transnational Kurdish women's rights networks.<sup>6</sup> Diaspora activism, as both Mojab and Rachel Gorman have observed, has been the product of the construction of Kurdish identity in the diaspora. Kurdish feminist activism has been closely associated with these activists' participation in the state-building process that has taken place in the Kurdistan Region since 1991.<sup>7</sup>

These studies have contributed greatly to our understanding of gender, politics, and society in the Kurdistan Region. They not only have brought our attention to the reality of gender discrimination and the scale of violence but have also revealed that Kurdish women are by no means passive victims of this violence. And they have underscored the increasingly transnational nature of women's rights activism in Kurdistan, as well as the efforts by conservative elements among the Kurdish elites and society to counter such campaigns.

Yet, this literature leaves some questions unexplored. Most important, few studies have addressed the relationship between the KRG's evolution as a de-facto state and the success of women's rights activism in the region in pushing for government action. It has not explored the manner in which the development of the KRG as a de-facto state, struggling to maintain its autonomy against ongoing contestation, has affected its socio-political developments within the Kurdistan Region, and the way in which women's rights activism has integrated into these developments. Recognizing the KRG's status as a de-facto state is crucial for understanding not only its security policies and (mostly informal) diplomacy but also domestic sociopolitical developments, including those related to civil society activists.

Examining the sources of this activism and its impact, I argue here that the development and successes of the women's rights advocacy network are to a great extent a product of the activists' ability to adjust their strategies to the KRG's position as a de-facto state and their

practical reliance on international norms of good governance in their advocacy efforts. In order to understand the successes of women's rights advocates in persuading the KRG to take actions against such practices as honor-based violence and FGM we have to take three factors into account. The first is the KRG's position as a de-facto state, which drives its pursuit of international legitimacy. The most effective advocacy groups are those that have been able to link their cause with international legitimacy. The second factor is that the women's rights movement has gradually developed into what is known in International Relations (IR) literature as a transnational advocacy network, based on a coalition between local activists, non-governmental organizations, diaspora activists, and international organizations. The final factor is the global emergence, toward the end of the Cold War, of government action against gender-based violence as a standard of good governance.

In order to support this argument, the first part of the article elaborates on these factors and demonstrates how they are relevant for understanding the relationship between the KRG and transnational women's rights advocacy. The following sections analyze the development of these networks in the Kurdistan Region and the shifts in the KRG's policies on this issue. Before proceeding, it should be noted that women's rights activism and the struggle for women's equality in the Kurdistan Region are by no means limited to violence, but to other forms of discrimination, such as polygamy. Still, I have chosen to focus on this aspect, for three reasons. First, the struggle against different forms of gender-based violence has been key for Kurdish feminist activists. As Tanyel Taysi and Sherizaan Minwalla note, "The inseparable issues of women's human rights and manifestations of violence against women are considered to be pressing areas of concern by international and local human rights actors present in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq."<sup>8</sup> Second, since the 1990s gender-based violence has become an important issue for the global women's rights movement. Many international treaties and conventions have dealt with the subject.<sup>9</sup> Its integration into the human rights discourse and the growing prominence of

the struggle against gender-based violence within the global women's rights movement have facilitated transnational advocacy of the subject in various contexts, including the Kurdistan Region. Finally, the struggle against gender-based violence epitomizes the tension between the desire to secure domestic support among the mostly conservative Kurdish society, and the crucial need to satisfy international opinion, which the KRG has faced as a de-facto state. Government action against gender-based violence has necessitated the KRG to intervene in the private sphere of its population, which has resulted in some powerful resistance. This has meant alienating conservative supporters, often essential for the protection of the KRG's integrity, in favor of achieving a foreign policy aim.

#### DE-FACTO STATEHOOD, THE PURSUIT OF LEGITIMACY, AND TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY

The Kurdistan Region emerged as a de-facto state in 1991. Under United Nations Security Council Resolution 688, the Iraqi army, following its defeat in the Gulf War, was forced to evacuate the three predominantly Kurdish governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniya, and Dohuk, and later parts of the Ninawa, Diyala, and Taamim (now Kirkuk) governorates. This was followed by the withdrawal of the Iraqi state apparatus and the imposition of a blockade by the central government. While this situation generated severe economic difficulties in the region, it also served as an opportunity for the Kurdish nationalist movement to establish its sovereignty over northern Iraq. In 1992 the Kurdistan Front, a loose umbrella organization of the Kurdish guerrilla movements, conducted elections for a regional parliament and presidency. The elections, described by international monitors as relatively free and fair,<sup>10</sup> resulted in a near tie between the two leading Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The two parties formed a coalition government, the KRG, along with a

regional parliament (the Kurdistan National Assembly), a judiciary system, and other rudimentary state institutions.

During the mid-1990s the region was torn by a civil war between the KDP and the PUK that hindered the Kurdish state-building process. However, the overthrow of the Ba‘th regime in 2003 by the American-led coalition reinvigorated these efforts, and the regional administration was reunified. Based on agreements between the KRG and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and later the new Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Region was reintegrated into Iraq as a federal region. Yet the KRG achieved a measure of authority over the area that greatly exceeded Baghdad’s plans. Since 2003 the KRG has run its own foreign and domestic policies almost without intervention from the central Iraqi government. It experienced an economic boom and, partly due to its well-trained armed forces (the Peshmerga) and partly due to its long isolation was spared the political and sectarian violence that tore up the rest of Iraq and paralyzed the federal government. The KRG was able to conduct regional election campaigns again in 2005 and 2009.

Although the KRG has never declared secession from Iraq, its de-facto autonomy has triggered fear and opposition in surrounding states. Iran and Turkey (at least until the late 2000s) were the most aggressive, fearing the implications of Kurdish autonomy, not to mention secession, for their own Kurdish minority communities. The West as well, even though generally sympathetic to Kurdish plight for safety from persecution, viewed Kurdish secession as a potential cause of instability in this key region.

This position of de-facto statehood is crucial for understanding the KRG and its decision-making processes. Studies on other nationalist movements that have become de-facto states, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Somaliland, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, have underlined the centrality of the pursuit of legitimacy for these actors. Due to the international community’s adherence to the principle of territorial integrity, secession is



generally understood as a threat to global order. States and international organizations have tended to object not only to secessionist aspirations for independence but also to the right of regional entities to act autonomously. De-facto states thus face chronic crises of legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> Because of that, Barry Bartmann suggested in his study of de-facto states, for these actors “self-justification becomes a foreign-policy priority.”<sup>12</sup> Nina Caspersen has argued that de-facto states often come to rely on what she defined as “earned” sovereignty in their pursuit of legitimacy, that is, on proving their long-term autonomous existence, success in state-building, and ability to meet standards of good governance.<sup>13</sup> During the post-Cold War era, as democratization, protection of human rights, and liberalization of the political system have become the international norms of good governance and theoretical criteria of recognition of new states,<sup>14</sup> de-facto states have made great efforts to prove they have met these standards. Particularly important in this respect has been the 2003 “standards before status” policy (SBS) for Kosovo. This policy, initiated by the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, introduced democratization and the protection of human and minority rights as explicit criteria of state recognition, in spite of fierce objection by its parent state and other members of the international community.<sup>15</sup>

In its effort to offset such attacks, the KRG has embraced two strategies. The first has been the denial of any plans of short-term secession. The second has been to embrace the discourse of earned sovereignty, constantly justifying its autonomy by pointing to its long-term sovereignty, stability, and prosperity. A major aspect of this campaign has been the KRG’s claimed success in democratizing and liberalizing its political system and modernizing the Kurdistan Region. Based on the 1992 regional election campaign, the first in Iraq in many decades, Kurdish speakers began referring to the KRG as the “democratic experiment” in their interaction with the international community, an expression which was supplemented by the term “the other Iraq” in the post-2003 era.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the first two decades of its existence, the

KRG used public forums to convey its image as a modernizing democracy committed to the protection of the human rights and freedom of its population and of minorities in the region, especially Christians who fled sectarian violence in southern? Iraq and found refuge in the Kurdistan Region.<sup>17</sup> In short, then, the KRG came to associate democratization and modernization with its entitlement to sovereignty.

The importance of this legitimization campaign is linked to the second factor that should be taken into account when assessing the successes as well as the failures of the women's rights advocacy networks in the Kurdistan Region, namely the nature of advocacy. Observers contend that democratic legitimization campaigns by separatist entities are often no more than lip service to potential aid providers or for the purpose of recognition.<sup>18</sup> But even if true, the pursuit of legitimacy is crucial for genuine reforms. Committing to a certain normative cause, argues Olga Avdeyeva, indicates a process of acculturation. Based on their perceptions of self and others, states develop imagined and real pressures from the community of states they aspire to be part of. And this may drive them to make certain commitments, for instance by ratifying an international treaty on a certain subject, even if no real pressure to do so exists. Through such acts of commitment, states "acquire a new social status associated with their formal recognition of norms included in the treaty." But these commitments can also serve advocates.<sup>19</sup> Especially in light of the intensification of transnational activism and networking, advocates have gained new capacities in promoting international norms and monitoring their implementation.

Indeed, transnationalism is a key term here. It refers to the willingness and ability of actors to collaborate with other actors across borders, advocating causes "above" and "below" national governments.<sup>20</sup> Transnational advocacy networks, described as a "family of political change organizations operating above and across national borders,"<sup>21</sup> have played a pivotal role as drivers of policy changes in many countries that initially rebuffed international norms.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, transnational advocacy has attracted great interest among social scientists, and

especially political scientists.<sup>23</sup> The emergence of a transnational feminist network, dedicated to the promotion of women's rights within the wider framework of human rights and to advocating for government action against gender-based violence has gained increasing interest. This is due to the influence such networks have had on changing attitudes toward violence against women among international organizations, states, and even societies.<sup>24</sup>

Of particular relevance here are the strategies employed by these networks. Lacking any coercive means, transnational advocacy networks rely on lobbying and other forms of persuasion. Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink have identified the strategies often employed by advocacy networks: putting norm-violating states on the international agenda, i.e., "shaming" both these states and international society into taking action; empowering, protecting, and hence mobilizing domestic opposition, social movements, and NGOs; challenging governments from above and below; and exposing governments to new ideas and norms.<sup>25</sup> The prospects of transnational advocacy's success, in turn, rely heavily on two factors: the network's success in building coalitions with members of the political elites in the state in which they operate (or "target state"); and the domestic structure of this target state, namely the nature of governance and the relationship between government and the population. With regard to the latter factor, studies have identified a causal relationship between the domestic structure of target states and transnational advocacy's success prospects. The more centralized the government is, the easier it can get for advocates to instigate socio-political changes. Centralized governments are hard to approach or infiltrate. But when lobbyists or advocates do manage to gain access to decision-makers in more centralized structures, they stand a better chance of accomplishing their goal. This is because centralized governments may face lesser challenges in implementing new policies or reforms.<sup>26</sup> The ability to gain access to decision-makers depends on the first factor, namely the success in building successful coalitions within the target actor. This essentially means an effective adjustment of advocates to their environment.<sup>27</sup>

Diaspora activism has become a recurring theme in transnational advocacy. For diaspora communities, operating simultaneously at both homeland and “host country” has become central to their national identity. As Ruba Salih notes, “rather than simply assimilating into their countries of residence or birth, Middle Eastern and North African diasporas in Europe are increasingly articulating their lives through transnational social, cultural, religious and political spheres.”<sup>28</sup> Diaspora activists, at least those concentrated in Europe and the US, often have better access to education and communication technologies than their compatriots in the homeland. They also often enjoy greater freedom of action, organization, and mobilization.<sup>29</sup> These opportunities have made diaspora activists useful to leaders in their countries of origin, either as lobbyists on their behalf in the host country, or as a potential pool of skilled returnees.<sup>30</sup> These same traits have also allowed diaspora activists more freedoms in challenging these governments. In various cases diaspora activists have played a leading role in the effort to advocate women’s rights, acting both in their homelands and their host countries.<sup>31</sup> This may also be motivated by the concern that the same forms of discrimination found in the homeland may exist within diaspora communities.<sup>32</sup>

While providing detailed accounts of the formation of transnational networks, most studies of transnationalism do not always pay sufficient attention to the target state and the manner in which its own interests and strategies, may affect transnational activism. Transnational networks may be “structures organized above the national level... around a common agenda.”<sup>33</sup> But they do not operate independently of this national level. One cannot understand the strategies employed by the feminist network in the Kurdistan Region without recognizing the interests driving the KRG to take certain actions, or without appreciating the way activists utilize international norms, practices, and treaties.

The final factor that should be taken into account in order to understand the success of women’s rights advocacy networks is the emergence of government action against gender-based

violence as an international standard of good governance. The first signs of this shift became apparent during the 1980s, when domestic and honor-based violence, FGM, and wartime sexual violence were incorporated into the wider human rights discourse. This was the result of growing interaction between feminist activists from Europe and North America and activists from Asia, Africa and Latin America, mostly in major conferences and conventions.<sup>34</sup> The 1990s witnessed the signing of several conventions and resolutions concerning violence against women as integral aspects of the general human rights agenda. The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVW) and the Vienna Declarations and Program of Action the same year were important in introducing the subject of gendered violence into the wider discourse on human rights.<sup>35</sup> The 1995 Beijing Fourth Conference on Women was highly important in this respect. During this conference participant governments consulted with NGOs in order to shape the formers' positions on the issue and came to embrace their discourse. Although the final document of the Beijing Conference was merely a policy statement with no legal binding power, women's rights networks were effective in generating a discursive change. This gradual change was "reflected in the positions governments took condemning violence against women at the UN conferences at Nairobi, Vienna, and Beijing."<sup>36</sup>

Another milestone was the 2001 UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 55/66, entitled "Working towards the Elimination of Crimes against Women Committed in the Name of Honour," ratified and extended in 2003 as Resolution 57/179. By stating that "States have an obligation to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish the perpetrators of such crimes and to provide protection to the victims, and that the failure to do so constitutes a human rights violation," and by calling upon states to "implement their relevant obligations under international human rights law and to implement specific international commitments," the UNGA both associated the subject with the wider human rights discourse and enhanced its status as a standard of good governance.<sup>37</sup> In 2003 the UNGA took another measure to affirm the

normative status of government action against gender-based violence, when it included in the Kosovo SBS an article calling for “effective action to eliminate violence against women and children... including preventative education and provision of legal and social services to victims.”<sup>38</sup> Conventions at the regional level, such as the African Union’s 2003 Rights of Women in Africa, have gone even further in associating gendered violence with the wider framework of human rights, by focusing on specific issues.<sup>39</sup>

All of these factors came into play when the movement calling for government action against gender-based violence emerged in the Kurdistan Region at the beginning of the 1990s. As the following sections demonstrate, the transnational women’s rights movement has achieved some dramatic successes by utilizing the KRG’s crisis of legitimacy, as well as the growing impact of the transnational women’s rights activism across the globe.

## THE FORMATION OF THE KRG AND THE RESURGENCE ADVOCACY

The so-called “liberation” of the Kurdistan Region and the fledgling democratic process were embraced enthusiastically by many Kurdish women, many of whom participated in the elections in spite of hurdles such as distance and illiteracy.<sup>40</sup> This period witnessed the emergence of regionally-based organized women’s rights activism. Initial activism focused mainly on the integration of women in politics and the economy and financial support for the widows of the Anfal campaign.<sup>41</sup> In 1992 about 15,000 women, some affiliated with the KDP and PUK and others independent, signed a petition to ban polygamy.<sup>42</sup> The petition was rejected by the parliament, but it marked Kurdish women’s willingness to challenge the main Kurdish parties. This activism was particularly significant amid continuous efforts by both the PUK and the KDP to co-opt women’s organizations and confine their activity to charity work.<sup>43</sup>

The intensification of gender-based violence in the region in the aftermath of the Iraqi withdrawal led to more activism on this subject. The first wave of violence was perpetrated by members of the Peshmerga against women suspected of “shaming” Kurdish honor for having relations with Ba‘th officials.<sup>44</sup> While this form of violence was mostly abolished by orders from the Kurdish leadership, the region witnessed a surge in domestic violence, mainly in the number of honor killings. This was not confined to what were often portrayed by KRG representatives as “backward” rural areas. The early 1990s witnessed major social changes in the Kurdistan Region. The Iran-Iraq War, and even more so the Anfal campaign, had resulted in the destruction of Kurdish villages, livelihood, and social fabric.<sup>45</sup> The period following the formation of the KRG witnessed the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people to the region.<sup>46</sup> Many of them migrated to the cities in search of work, carrying with them traditions and practices that had been less prevalent in the cities. With these socio-economic shifts, practices of gender-based violence became more prevalent. The more educated classes were not immune, and different practices also became common among civil servants, teachers and members of the Peshmerga, as one survey reveals.<sup>47</sup>

In response to this surge in violence, the Independent Women’s Organization (IWO), affiliated with the Worker-Communist Party of Iraq, established in 1993 the first shelter for women at risk in the region.<sup>48</sup> Together with other activists, the IWO intensified the pressure on the KRG to revoke article 111 from the Iraqi Penal Code, which the KRG enacted as well. This article was introduced by Saddam Hussein into the Penal Code in 1990, as part of his effort to recuperate public support amid Iraq’s growing international isolation, and it exempted killers of women in the name of family honor from being punished for murder (or from punishment at all).<sup>49</sup>

The KRG was willing to embrace, to some extent, the idea of integrating women into politics and public life. Almost from its inception the KRG enacted “gender quotas,” compelling

political parties to meet a 25 percent female membership quota. When, in 2005, the new Iraqi government set the same threshold of 25 percent for women's representation in the Iraqi Council of Representatives, the KRG raised its regional threshold to 30 percent. The Kurdish parties were also the only ones, together with the Iraqi National Accord party,<sup>50</sup> to appoint women as ministers in the Iraqi Interim Government of 2004. In this sense the KRG followed a wider trend in the Middle East (and other parts of the world), where authoritarian governments implemented cosmetic measures to appease international public opinion.<sup>51</sup> And as in many of these cases, gender quotas often had no practical significance, as decision making occurred mainly in very narrow circles outside the parliament. At least during the 1990s, in the KRG these circles were the parties' politburos, which no female members.<sup>52</sup>

Countering gender-based violence, on the other hand, was a different story. It meant intervention in the intimate aspect of family life. Such a move would have risked the KRG's relations with many of its supporters, including soldiers and civil servants. On the other hand, it also realized the potential damage that the wave of gendered violence could do to its image in international public opinion.<sup>53</sup> Some of its members certainly objected to this form of violence. But the fear of alienating conservative supporters and potential recruits was more powerful. Trying to avoid this dilemma, the KRG initially refused to engage in any public discussion of domestic and other forms of gender-based violence.

In the face of this reality, women's rights activists became aware of the need to establish contacts with activists outside the region. Members of the IWO, for example, began to "collect petitions and mobilize international women's and human rights groups in support of Kurdish women."<sup>54</sup> As one activist recalls,

The most immediate task of the IWO was to prevent 'honour killings', by documenting and exposing such crimes in Kurdistan and abroad, and by insisting that the perpetrators be



brought to justice. The other primary task was to raise people's awareness and to campaign for the repeal or amendment of laws that discriminate against women... In the future IWO... hopes to address contraception, health and education by visiting women in schools, as well as open more shelters to protect women. To do all this, the organisation needs support from the international community.<sup>55</sup>

This brief description reveals that the post-1991 movement against gendered violence in the Kurdistan Region turned transnational rather rapidly. Not only the desire to build contacts with other activists, but also the strategies employed by the activists point to that. As noted above, the documentation of and shaming of government for misconduct are quintessential tactics of transnational networks. In this manner, we can say that this period constituted an important stage in the transition of women's rights activism in the region from its existing engagement with a regional network to its creation of a transnational one.

The Kurdish diaspora came to play a pivotal part in the emerging advocacy network. Members of Kurdish diaspora communities across western Europe participated in the state-building process in the Kurdistan Region since its inception in 1991. Through their activism they "have already transformed the emerging Kurdish nation into a transnational entity."<sup>56</sup> For many of the Kurds in the diaspora, the formation of the KRG was seen as a milestone toward the materialization of the aspiration for a Kurdish state.<sup>57</sup> The Kurdish guerrillas lacked the training and skills necessary to run the civilian affairs of the Kurdistan Region, and members of the diaspora and returnees became crucial for regional state-building efforts.<sup>58</sup> The Kurdish diaspora, now familiar with Western education, technology and languages, became a potential source of support in the process of building the KRG.

As in other cases of diaspora activism, the younger generation of the Kurdish diaspora became important for transnational activism both because of its members' greater access to

education and technology and their freedom of organization and movement.<sup>59</sup> Members of the diaspora have been able to communicate better with activists in all parts of Kurdistan, as well as to disseminate their causes, findings, and ideas.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the residents of the besieged Kurdistan Region, many Kurds in the diaspora had greater freedom and means to travel. This served them by exposing them to other activists from different parts of the world and by providing them with some leverage over the KRG, as they became its representatives abroad. In this manner, the only Kurdish representatives to the 1995 Beijing Conference, significant for institutionalizing gender-based violence as part of the wider framework of human rights, actually came from the diaspora. One attendant, Pary Karadaghi, the executive of the California-based Kurdish Human Rights Organization, recounted in an interview to the KDP's Arabic-language journal that:

Only five Kurdish women participated in the conference, which is a small number considering its massive size and the number of participating missions. This is due to two reasons: first, the Chinese government set obstacles to popular missions, particularly those of persecuted people... and second, Kurdistan is divided [between Turkey, Iraq, etc.] and the governments that divide our nation do not allow Kurdistani women to participate in such conferences and congresses, unless it serves their purpose, which Kurdish women reject... In fact, the forum for the popular women's organizations in China serves as a model for women everywhere and is particular and influential, considering the participation of missions from all over the world.<sup>61</sup>

This position enabled the diaspora activists to openly criticize the Kurdish leadership. Replying to a question about the actions required by the government with regard to women's rights, Karadaghi commented that

When we call for the elimination of injustice and the illegal conduct against women it does not mean a rebellion against religion and morals. We demand that the parliament and the government formulate laws that would protect women's rights and give them a decent role in building society... setting limits to polygamy ... [as well as] the protection of women from rape and forced marriage.<sup>62</sup>

These young activists were also motivated by the increase in the number of incidents of honor killings in their own communities, which negatively affected their image in the host countries.<sup>63</sup> Grasping this, the IWO established a branch in London, operated by members of the Kurdish community there, which advanced the transnational nature of its advocacy campaign. It built links with other organizations, and began to petition international organizations, including a petition in 2000 to the UN General Secretary Kofi Anan, to take action on the matter of violence against Kurdish women.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq had important implications for the struggle against gender-based violence in the region. Both the CPA and subsequent Iraqi governments claimed to have put women's participation in public life and the protection of their civil rights at the top of their agendas. Feminist historians have criticized these claims on several grounds: first, they argued, by doing so the CPA and the Western-backed governments in Iraq turned the subject of women's liberation into an arena of struggle against the occupation, with Islamists and ultranationalists employing patriarchal traditions as anti-imperialist symbols. In addition, feminist critiques of Western-initiated women's liberation campaigns have pointed out that the coalition and its Iraqi allies were quick to sacrifice women's rights in favor of alliances with conservative elements of society in their war on insurgency. At the end of day, they have argued, in most parts of Iraq the situation of women actually worsened after the war.<sup>64</sup>

It is true that the CPA's policies failed to achieve many of the CPA's stated goals, and certainly gender-equality. Still, even if utilitarian, these policies did contribute to the women's rights campaign in the Kurdistan Region. The legalization of the KRG's status as a federal entity within Iraq immediately increased its interaction with transnational actors. The removal of the Ba'th regime facilitated the entry of more NGOs into Iraq. Initially, much of the assistance was directed toward the south and center of Iraq, where the series of crises required heavier aid. But with the rapid deterioration of security and stability in the rest of Iraq, NGOs and aid-relief agencies found the Kurdistan Region to be a safe haven for activism.<sup>65</sup> During the 1990s most aid to the region had focused on relief operations and rehabilitation. But in the post-2003 period it concentrated more on democratization and introduction of good standards of governance into both Iraq and the KRG.<sup>66</sup> The main actors in this campaign were international NGOs committed to democratization, as well as UN agencies, led by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI). The changing nature of intervention also meant greater interaction between these organizations and domestic activists. Nevertheless, these organizations should not be viewed as "external" to activism. Their impact cannot be understood without recognizing their interaction with local activists, as well as their ability to gain access to the KRG.

During the 2000s, the transnational nature of the women's rights network took a clear shape. Domestic activists and NGOs now gained access to training and funding delivered by international NGOs and aid agencies. This allowed them to intensify their own initiatives which, it should be stressed again, they had begun executing during the 1990s. Moreover, the presence of so-called external actors in the region assisted activists in amplifying their discontent. From being initially confined to the Kurdistan Region, the struggle now became part of a global movement against gender-based violence. This integration in turn assisted the women's rights network in advocating its cause and encouraging changes in the KRG's policies.

A vivid example of this is the campaign against FGM in the Kurdistan Region, whose roots date back to the late 1990s. Like other aspects of gendered violence, the KRG deliberately avoided publicly discussing the subject. However, activists began to work against FGM, initially through data collection. During this period, local activists Runak Faraj Rahim and Hana Shwan conducted a survey of the practice in the Sulaymaniya governorate. They then moved on to disseminate their findings globally, publishing their data in English and Kurdish.<sup>67</sup> During the post-2003 era, the subject became a target of transnational activism. Between the years 2002 and 2004, the German NGO, WADI (Association for Crisis Assistance and Solidary Development Co-Operation), conducted a study into the practice of FGM in the Germian district of Sulaymaniya. WADI promoted public health in rural area of Kurdistan through its teams, often comprised of local doctors, social workers, and activists, and used the connections its teams built with local women to collect data. WADI's initial investigation revealed that 60 percent of the women in the region were circumcised.<sup>68</sup> After documenting the phenomenon, WADI turned to disseminate its findings, using various platforms, including its own website, to intensify its pressure on the PUK-dominated KRG in Sulaymaniya. WADI then expanded its research to cover wider parts of the Kurdistan Region. It published its findings in 2010 in a comprehensive report.<sup>69</sup>

The 2010 WADI report mistakenly claimed that it was the first to investigate the subject and that knowledge of the subject only reached the KRG in 2004; this has proven to be incorrect.<sup>70</sup> The report also lacked any reference to the inner debate among Kurds. It marginalized the detrimental impact that conflict usually has on women's security and health. And yet, WADI's activism epitomizes the transnational nature of the women's rights advocacy campaign. WADI's research projects were conducted by local activists in cooperation with foreign volunteers, and funded by international developments. WADI's researchers relied on the organization's established presence in the region and its positive image among the local

population and the government to launch studies on a subject rarely discussed in public. The research findings have been used to stir public debate in the region and outside of it, thus encouraging debate. And as I demonstrate below, the KRG has acknowledged WADI's and other members of the advocacy network's contribution to the discussion and its policies.

In other instances external aid allowed domestic actors to expand their existing infrastructure and intensify their activism. The Sulaymaniya-based women's rights organization, Asuda, self-described as "the only non-affiliated [i.e. non-partisan] NGO working on women issues,"<sup>71</sup> used funding by international NGOs to establish research and awareness departments. The awareness department aimed to "promote the consciousness of the society with regard to the consequences of violence against women," by building networks with local institutions (media, universities, etc.), while the research department aimed to conduct studies on different aspects of gender-based violence in the region.<sup>72</sup> Simultaneously, Asuda also became the largest operator of shelters for women at risk of domestic violence in the Kurdistan Region.

An important tool used by transnational networks of activism has been their ability to associate the campaign against gender-based violence with the idea of Kurdish sovereignty and statehood – by asserting that protecting women from violence is a necessary component of international legitimacy. In addition to highlighting the KRG's incompetence in preventing acts of violence, activists have also utilized the KRG's sense of crisis and its legitimization effort. They have done so mainly by emphasizing that struggle against gender-based violence is inseparable of democratization and modernization, two main themes in the KRG's discourse of earned sovereignty.

One early example of this is the Charter for the Rights and Freedoms of Women in the Kurdish Regions and Diaspora. Published in 2004, in English, Kurdish (both Sorani and Kurmanji dialects), Arabic, Turkish, and French, the Charter relies on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the DEVW.<sup>73</sup> The

Charter targeted the KRG specifically but was an initiative of Kurdish activists from all parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora. And it was endorsed by foreign politicians. Thus, Mojab argues, it was “truly a transnational project.”<sup>74</sup>

Secularist feminists were particularly keen on lobbying for the KRG’s adherence to international conventions on women’s and human rights.<sup>75</sup> In 2010 civil rights activists and lawyers gathered in Sulaymaniya for a conference titled “Fighting Violence against Women through Law’s Supremacy,” which was funded by the International Human Rights Law Institute, based at DePaul University in Chicago. At this conference, the speakers, including local activists as well as representatives of the American embassy stationed in the Kurdistan Region, demanded adherence to the CEDAW, reminding the Iraqi and regional authorities that Iraq is a signatory of the convention and that failing to meet its demands is “a crime.”<sup>76</sup>

In 2006, Tahir Hasso Zebari, head of the Media Department at Salahuddin University, published a book in Arabic titled *The Role of Kurdish Women in Political Participation*. Already at the introduction to the Zebari stressed that gender equality and addressing issues related to gender-based violence are inseparable aspects of political progress, thus identifying the KRG’s sensitivity to the subject. Discussing international conventions on women’s rights, such as the 1995 Beijing Conference, Zebari than notes that:

[The issue of gender equality] represents an important element in the characteristics of the democratic transition which the society is undergoing... Our political position requires the promotion of our possibilities and achievements within the framework of changing the status of women. And this framework [in turn] falls within the framework of real political development.<sup>77</sup>

Elsewhere Zebari has also associated government promotion of women's rights as an essential part of democratization in the Kurdistan Region, another theme of the KRG's strategy of survival:

At a time where the subject of democracy occupies a central position in the Kurdish renaissance which began at the early 1990s... the importance of the question of Kurdish women constitutes the backbone of this program. In light of the organic connection between the democratic transformation and women's liberation... the liberation of women and their participation in the productive political process, on an equal basis with men, constitutes a fundamental principle in a true democratic transition.<sup>78</sup>

A similar initiative to stir debate in Kurdistan was made by Shahbal Ma'ruf Dizayi, a jurist and consultant to the regional Ministry of Human Rights.<sup>79</sup> In a book entitled *Violence against Women: A Comparative Legal Study of International and Domestic Law*, she stressed the growing correlation between women's rights and human rights. Reviewing the historical evolution of global action against gendered violence, she then notes that the authorities' failure to counter endemic violence against women is a failure to meet the international standards of governance.<sup>80</sup> Unlike Zebari, Dizayi refrained from addressing the KRG specifically. Instead, she directed her claims against the Iraqi authorities. Nevertheless, the arguments she used and the fact that Dizayi was acting within the Kurdistan Region and was loosely affiliated with the KRG meant that her argument implicitly targeted the KRG as well.

Another example of this appears in a report published following a study of honor killings in the Kurdistan Region. The research was led by a diaspora-based activist, Nazand Begikhani. It was hosted by two British universities, Bristol and Roehampton, and conducted jointly with the London-based Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP). The research team justified the need to



conduct such research and publish this report, in both English and Kurdish, based upon the aforementioned UNGA Resolution 55/66.<sup>81</sup> This was not a random statement; this specific resolution referred first and foremost to UN member states, namely recognized and legitimate governments. By applying it to the KRG the writers of the report bound the KRG with recognized states. The report also linked government action against gender-based violence with modernization and democratization, two core dimensions of earned sovereignty. Noting the modernization of the Kurdistan Region under the KRG, the report emphasizes that “initiatives to change harmful cultural practices are part of this modernization and democratization effort, to which this research is committed.”<sup>82</sup> It also added that “an important underlying issue is the need for wide-ranging addressing of gender-equality, and the development of a gender equality scheme, as a strong government modernizing commitment.”<sup>83</sup> One may question the independence of a report funded by the KRG. Nevertheless, the fact that the research was conducted outside of the region and was headed by a member of the diaspora gave researchers the necessary freedom to actually publish a report just as critical as those circulated by other activists. By funding the report the KRG may have tried to co-opt the researchers, but ultimately it was also exposed to further critique and ideas about the link between women’s rights and governance.

Asuda, too, used UNGA Resolution 55/66 in its effort to lobby the KRG to take action against honor killings, in a report sponsored by UNAMI and conducted for Asuda by Tanyel Taysi, a U.S. citizen and a lecturer at the University of Kurdistan-Hawler (Erbil).<sup>84</sup> It was even more explicit in correlating its cause with statehood, as it contained a section dedicated to the subject of “States’ Obligation to Prevent and Protect under International Law.”<sup>85</sup> Elsewhere Taysi joined hands with Sherizaan Minwalla, an American attorney active in the Kurdistan Region. In a report sponsored by the London-based KHRP, the two also pointed to KRG’s failures to protect women from raging violence in the region. Violence against women, they

asserted in the report, is a “violation of basic human rights,” the result of the lack of the rule of law.<sup>86</sup>

Employing similar strategies, the Khatuzin Centre of Social Action, a KDP-affiliated NGO dedicated to the promotion of women’s rights, used the summer 2005 meeting of the Constitutional Committee, a group of regional parliamentarians assembled to write a regional constitution, to submit a bill which called for the banning of FGM and other forms of discrimination. This bill as well was partially based on the CEDAW, as well as on the African Union’s 2003 Rights of Women in Africa, though it excluded the sections on homosexuality and abortion appearing in the latter two.<sup>87</sup> Khatuzin’s choice to use the meeting of the Constitutional Committee was not coincidental; the writing of a regional constitution was yet another Kurdish step toward consolidating its autonomy and by intervening in this process Khatuzin turned the subject of women’s rights and the campaign against gender-based violence into an element of the process of state-building.

Since the early 1990s, then, women’s rights activism in the region has grown into a transnational network, encompassing a diverse range of actors. NGOs and international aid agencies have provided the local activists who spearhead the campaign with resources, guidance, and opportunities to voice their grievances outside the Kurdistan Region. Diaspora activists, operating simultaneously within and outside the region, have also helped to amplify the protest of Kurdish women, bridging activists in the region with international organizations. This activism has not been free of flaws and hindrances: occasionally, actions such as reports and fact-finding missions have served to promote their authors; some activists have sometimes settled for minor reforms; and advocacy, especially at the international level, has not been forceful enough. Moreover, this transnational advocacy campaign has encountered various difficulties, which have gone beyond the KRG’s initial antagonism toward its activities. Perhaps the greatest difficulty has been the socioeconomic gap between activists and rural women. Often

advocating a secularist agenda, feminist activists have encountered indifference or even hostility toward their causes among rural women, but even in major cities.<sup>88</sup> On the other hand, processes of urbanization have already driven some social changes, as the decreasing rates of FGM among younger Kurdish women in the cities reveal.<sup>89</sup> Undoubtedly, socioeconomic structures and local traditions have impeded wider changes.

And yet, the authorities are often the key for changing social structures and. For that reason, activism against gendered violence has targeted mainly the KRG. Faced with this constant advocacy, the KRG gradually came to change its rejectionist position.

#### THE KRG'S RESPONSE TO THE CAMPAIGN: ENGAGEMENT AND THE LIMITATIONS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The KRG has continuously engaged with the women's rights network in the Kurdistan Region, as with other transnational networks. On some occasions, KRG representatives publicly credited this network with shaping its policies. For example, when declaring the passing of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in the regional parliament, the KRG's prime minister, Barham Salih, thanked "civil society organizations active in this field and all those who protect women and their rights."<sup>90</sup> Mostly, however, KRG representatives have publicly confronted the transnational advocates, rejecting their findings or denouncing their arguments about the KRG's failure to protect women's rights. Thus, the KRG frequently rebuffed UNAMI's negative reports of the KRG's human rights' and women rights' records.<sup>91</sup> But even when officially declining to embrace the arguments and recommendations made by advocates, the KRG in fact has communicated and interacted with the women's rights network. It is impossible to separate the KRG's reforms from the advocacy of the women's network.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the women's rights network has been to bring the subject of gender-based violence to the forefront of public debate in the Kurdistan

Region. Advocacy has compelled the KRG to acknowledge the prevalence of gender-based violence in the region and also to accept some responsibility for the problem. But change was not only discursive. Especially during the second decade of its existence, the KRG began taking more concrete steps against gender-based violence. Legislation was the first step in the wider change in the KRG's attitudes. A constitutive moment in this campaign took place in April 2000, when the Sulaymaniya-based PUK-controlled administration issued Decree No. 59, which gave regional courts the discretion to ignore the articles in the Penal Code exempting killers in the name of family honor from punishment, making it clear that "[t]he killing or abuse of women with the pretext of cleansing the shame is not considered to be a mitigating excuse." The Erbil-based KDP administration followed in 2002, issuing a similar resolution, Law No. 14.<sup>92</sup> The process that led to this decision serves as an excellent example of the power of transnational advocacy. In the years preceding the decrees, the KDP and PUK objected to any change in the Iraqi legislation. Both the male leadership and the parties' women's organization followed the official line, which denied the KRG's responsibility for such acts and blamed it on local or Islamic traditions.<sup>93</sup> In 2000, nevertheless, general attitudes began changing. Pressures on the PUK, and then later on the KDP mounted: from the IWO, active both within and outside Kurdistan, as well as from other local and diaspora organizations, which were eventually joined by the parties-affiliated women's organizations.<sup>94</sup>

This legislation has had mixed results. One contemporary report on the region noted a decline in the number of murder cases associated with honor in the period following the legislation.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, families now chose to force victims to commit suicide, or reported the murders as suicide cases. This proves that while the KRG's authority in the region increased – as perpetrators did seek not to violate the new legislation openly – it was not enough to uproot such practices. Nevertheless, the act of legislation in itself marked a change in the KRG's attitude toward the subject of gendered violence in the Kurdistan

Region, a change that would not have been achieved without advocacy. Furthermore, the KRG gradually became more willing to discuss the subject. Fawzi al-‘Atroushi, a veteran journalist and campaigner for the Kurdish cause, and the Deputy Minister of Culture in Baghdad since 2005, openly criticized the Kurdish authorities on the KRG’s official website for failing to take action on the so-called suicides among women:

there is a ‘masculine’ conspiracy, which has nothing to do with manhood, which stands behind these false claims. It involves the victim’s husband or relative as well as elements in the medico-legal [profession] and the judiciary system that try to cover the incidents of intentional killing and the sexual, mental and social crimes that the Kurdistan women are subjected to, in light of the laziness and incompetence of the Union of Jurists in Kurdistan...<sup>96</sup>

Sensing the risk of further cosmetic action to appease donor states and international public opinion, ‘Atroushi warned that:

[Treatment of the subject] should happen willingly and gradually, through hard and prolonged endeavours from all concerning sides... so that the subject would not turn into temporary bubbles and a reflection of internal and external voices that condemn this serious and frightening phenomenon, or an effort to appease the worries of European civil society organisations which have put Iraqi Kurdistan under scrutiny and have issued negative reports which do not portray the KRG well.<sup>97</sup>

These statements, made by someone from the Kurdish elite, teach us of the changing trends within the KRG. In themselves they do not indicate serious action against the gendered

violence. But such polemic could not have taken place if not for the KRG's acknowledgement of the urgency of the matter.

Further development took place in 2007, when the KRG undertook an official investigation into the subject of violence against women in the Sulaymaniya governorate in the years 2005-2007. The ensuing report encompassed all practices targeted by women's rights activists: honor killings and attempted killings, cases of suicide, forced marriage, prevention of education, and defamation. According to the report, whose findings were published on the KRG's website, 1108 women were subjected to various forms of violence and oppression in 2006, including murder or attempted murder. The report also stated that in 2006, suicide counted for 88 percent of deaths of women in Kurdistan, reaching the number of 533. This is in comparison to 22 percent and 289 cases of suicide in 2005.<sup>98</sup> The fact that the Human Rights Ministry sponsored this study indicates that the KRG had internalized the idea that women's rights are part of the wider framework of human rights and not merely an internal affair. The study itself served to promote the debate in the KRG about women's rights. One columnist, for example, argued on the KRG website that

Societies now view these [honor killings] through laws and legislation which help to protect... human rights... If we want to elevate the Kurdistan Region and turn it into a model for the governments and states of the region, then we should push and demand our government in the region, and first and for most President [Mas'ud] Barzani, to undertake legislation to protect women urgently, otherwise the number of these crimes will increase...<sup>99</sup>

The practice of FGM was excluded from the 2007 report, but the regional Human Rights Ministry carried out research into the practice in the Chamchamal region in 2009,<sup>100</sup> and the KRG funded the 2007 report conducted by the Kurdish Women's Rights Watch in London.<sup>101</sup> In the same year the KRG's prime minister, Nechirvan Barzani, established the Honor Killing Monitoring Commission, which aimed to monitor the implementation of legislation with regard to honor crimes.<sup>102</sup> Directories were established in Erbil, Sulaymaniya, and Dohuk to enhance the commission's work. Nazand Begikhani was appointed as advisor to the commission. Pakhshan Zangan, then an MP for the Communist Party and a women's rights activist, argued that "Their existence is a message to men that the government is beginning to pay attention to women's issues. At the same time, it gives women more confidence when they see that the government is serious in defending their rights."<sup>103</sup> Also in 2007, the KRG tried to demonstrate further its commitment to countering honor killings when it excluded convicts charged with honor-based crimes from a general amnesty given to other convicts in the region.<sup>104</sup> In 2008 the KRG also publicly acknowledged that the increase in suicide rates in the region indicated the prevalence of honor-based violence. Noting the "increase in the rates of suicide among women and the spread of the phenomenon of violence against women, whether for honor-related or other socially-related reasons," the KRG declared the establishment of a Center for Monitoring Violence against Women.<sup>105</sup> Finally, in the same year, the regional parliament passed a bill prohibiting the practice of FGM and setting prison sentences against perpetrators.<sup>106</sup> The bill was finally passed in 2011 as part of a regional Anti-Domestic Violence Law.<sup>107</sup>

The KRG's measures against gender-based violence in the region were vigorously integrated into its effort to demonstrate to the international community its earned sovereignty and adherence to international norms of good governance. When taking action on this matter, the KRG often made sure to present its policy as a symbol of its ability to run its own affairs. This point is crucial, because it demonstrates that the KRG has been paying attention to advocacy, and

has internalized the notion that protection of women's right in particular, and of human rights in general, is associated with democratization and modernization. One platform serving the KRG in this task has been its semi-official English-language newspaper, *the Kurdish Globe*. One article, covering the KRG's effort to counter the issue of honor-killings in 2008, stated that

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is creating a mechanism to ensure the Region's laws to protect women from violence are implemented at all levels... Following the commission's meeting, Prime Minister Barzani said, "The changes agreed today will further strengthen the rule of law in the Kurdistan Region when it comes to prosecuting those who commit crimes against women. It is essential that our courts investigate and prosecute crimes against women in the most efficient way possible."<sup>108</sup>

Reports in the same spirit were published when the KRG passed its Anti-Domestic Violence Law,<sup>109</sup> and in relation to the KRG's success in countering the practice of FGM.<sup>110</sup>

Evidently, the KRG has yet to meet international standards, or even its own rhetorical commitments. Violence against women is still endemic in the region. As the KRG enters the third decade of its existence FGM and honor killings are still prevalent.<sup>111</sup> However, this should not undermine the importance of transnational activism or render it irrelevant. As Taysi and Minwalla have reported from the region, since the late 1990s "Positive developments have occurred, opening the space for women to continue to advocate for greater freedoms and improved government responses." Change has been slow, but "Despite this, to the credit of key persons among the government, security and law enforcement, legal community including the judiciary, tribal and religious leaders and of course women's rights activists, prevention of harm and protection for victims is increasing."<sup>112</sup>



The KRG, then, can be said to have gone through an acculturation process. While not signing any formal treaty (as it has been prevented from doing so), the KRG has committed to the principles of statehood, as it has interpreted them. As protection of women's rights has become integral to these, it has become easier for advocates to monitor the KRG's actions, advise it on matters relevant to violence against women, and shame it for failing to protect women's rights and thus meet its pledges. Long-term, deep-rooted reforms require socioeconomic transformation. The society in the Kurdistan Region is still going through major shifts. Successfully introducing action against gender-based violence as a norm of good governance may prove to be the way to start this process.

## CONCLUSION

Studying women's rights advocacy and the struggle against gender-based violence in the Kurdistan Region provides important insights that go well beyond this subject area. It teaches us about the development of the Kurdistan Regional Government, its policies, the role of transnational advocacy in processes of reforms and of ideas in policy-making. The change in the KRG's attitude and policies toward gendered violence can serve us to better grasp similar developments relating to the promotion of human and civil rights in the Kurdistan Region. The KRG's status as a de-facto state and the potential opportunity that this has afforded for advocacy networks to promote their cause can be applied to other instances, such as the campaign for freedom of media in the region, the fight against corruption, or reforms in the political system.

The struggle of the women's rights network in Kurdistan is a quintessential example of a transnational advocacy campaign. As part of its effort to transform domestic reality, it has relied on norms, ideas, and practices that have been developed at the international level. Its impact on the KRG's policy has derived from its success in associating these ideas with statehood, sovereignty, and good governance. This points to a well-calculated strategy, tuned in to the

interests and aspirations of the KRG. A key to this success has been the competence of the women's rights network in utilizing the KRG's pursuit of international legitimacy, a derivative of the latter's contested status. Another key has been the maximization of its own transnational nature and access to media and other resources.

The possibilities for network-building and the opportunities for advocacy that can lead to genuine socio-political changes across the globe constantly expand. The transnational struggle against gender-based violence has been widening and getting far greater influence in different parts of the globe. As such it has attracted a growing scholarly interest, and this article has sought to contribute to this endeavor. Moreover, this article has aimed to provide tools to those seeking to better understand the constantly evolving nature of transnational advocacy. There is a range of other issue-areas, which have either become subjects of transnational advocacy, or are bound to become ones: education, public health, and workers' rights in various countries and regions are only a few examples. We now face the mission of following the course of advocacy in these areas, while taking all of the relevant factors that shape advocacy into account..

---

*Author's note:* This research was supported by the LSE Middle East Centre under the Emirates Scholarship. An earlier version of this article was presented at the International Studies Association annual meeting in 2012. The author wishes to thank the four anonymous reviewers for their comments.

<sup>1</sup> The term *de facto*, or unrecognized, state is used in the IR literature to denote separatist entities that have obtained some of the basic features of statehood, including a functioning government, marked territory, permanent population, and capacity to interact with other actors in the global system, but is not legally recognized as a state by most other states and international organizations. The use of the term has served to distinguish such actors from other forms of

---

statelessness. In addition to the KRG, the term has been applied to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Somaliland, Taiwan, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and more. The de facto state was first introduced as a theoretical concept in Scott Pegg, *International Society and the De Facto State* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 13; 30-42. For the most recent comprehensive study of de facto states, which also include the KRG, see Nina Caspersen and Gareth Stansfield (ed.), *Unrecognized States in the International System* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> On the former see: Karin Mlodoch, “‘We Want to Be Remembered as Strong Women, Not as Shepherds’: Women Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq Struggling for Agency and Acknowledgement,” *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 63-91; Tanyel B. Taysi and Sherizaan Minwalla, “Structural Violence against Women in Kurdistan, Iraq,” *KHRP: Legal Review*, ed. Kerim Yıldız and Mark Muller (2009): 87-120; Shahrzad Mojab, “Kurdish Women in the Zone of Genocide and Gendercide,” *al-Raida* XXI, no. 103 (Fall 2003): 20-25. On the latter see: Andrea Fischer-Tahir, “Competition, Cooperation and Resistance: Women in the Political Field in Iraq,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 6 (2010): 1381–94.

<sup>3</sup> Nadjé al-Ali and Nicolla Pratt, “Between Nationalism and Women’s Rights: The Kurdish Women’s Movement in Iraq,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4, no.3 (2011): 337–353.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Fischer-Tahir, “Gendered Memories and Masculinity: Kurdish Peshmerga on the Anfal Campaign in Iraq,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 8, no. 1 (2012): 92-114; see also Mlodoch, “We Want to Be Remembered.”

<sup>5</sup> Shahrzad Mojab, “The Politics of ‘Cyberfeminism’ in the Middle East: The Case of Kurdish Women,” *Race, Gender & Class* 8, no. 4 (2001): 42-61.

- 
- <sup>6</sup> Shahrzad Mojab, "Gender, Nation and Diaspora Kurdish Women in Feminist Transnational Struggles," in *Muslim Diaspora*, ed. Haideh Moghissi (Abingdon, N.Y.: Routledge, 2006), 116-32.
- <sup>7</sup> Shahrzad Mojab and Rachel Gorman, "Dispersed Nationalism: War, Diaspora and Kurdish Women Organizing," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no.1 (Winter 2007): 58-85.
- <sup>8</sup> Taysi and Minwalla, "Structural Violence against Women," 87.
- <sup>9</sup> Jennifer J. Rasmussen, "Innocence Lost: The Evolution of a Successful Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Program," *41 Valparaiso University Law Review* 919 (2007): 929-31.
- <sup>10</sup> Michael Meadowcroft, *Kurdistan Elections for Iraqi Kurdish National Assembly and Leader of the Kurdistan Liberation Movement, 19 May 1992, Monitoring Report* (London: Electoral Reform Consultancy Services, 1992), 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Deon Geldenhuys, *Contested States in World Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- <sup>12</sup> Barry Bartmann, "Political Realities and Legal Anomalies," in *De Facto States: The Quest for Sovereignty*, ed. Tozun Bahcelli, Barry Bartmann, and Henry Srebnik (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 15-16.
- <sup>13</sup> Nina Caspersen, *Unrecognized States: The Struggle for Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
- <sup>14</sup> Ian Clark, *The Post-Cold War Order: The Spoils of Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rick Fawn and James Mayall, "Recognition, Self-Determination and Secession in Post-Cold War International Society," in *International Society after the Cold War*, ed. Fawn and Jeremy Larkins (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 193-220.
- <sup>15</sup> Rick Fawn has described this as the "Kosovo effect," in "The Kosovo – and Montenegro – Effect," *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2008): 269-94.

---

<sup>16</sup> An example of this campaign is a booklet published by the KRG for the purpose of encouraging foreign investment in Kurdistan. See KRG, *Kurdistan: the Other Iraq*, 2006. <http://www.theotheriraq.com> (accessed 22 December 2010).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, a report issued by the KRG's representation in the UK, *The Status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq*, December 2009, [http://www.krg.org/uploads/documents/Status\\_Christians\\_Kurdistan\\_Region\\_Dec\\_09\\_\\_2009\\_12\\_22\\_h16m26s16.pdf](http://www.krg.org/uploads/documents/Status_Christians_Kurdistan_Region_Dec_09__2009_12_22_h16m26s16.pdf) (accessed 12 March 2010). It should be noted that although the situation of Christians in the Kurdistan Region is much safer than in other parts of Iraq, some Christian communities have been subjected to harassment by Islamist elements and, at least in the disputed territories, by the KRG's security forces. See Human Rights Watch (hereafter HRW), *On Vulnerable Grounds: Violence against Minority Communities in Ninveh Province's Disputed Territories* (New York: HRW, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Donald Horowitz, "A Right to Secede?," in *Secession and Self-Determination*, ed. Stephen Macedo and Allen Buchanan (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 50-76.

<sup>19</sup> Olga Avdeyeva, "When Do States Comply with International Treaties? Policies on Violence against Women in Post-Communist States," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no.4 (2007): 881-82.

<sup>20</sup> Ruba Salih, "Transnational Public Spheres from 'Above' and from 'Below,'" *Anthropology of the Middle East* 5, no. 1 (2010): 53-70.

<sup>21</sup> Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 4.

---

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; Avdeyeva, “When Do States”; Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink, eds., *The Power of Human Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Thomas Risse-Kappen, ed. *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>24</sup> Moghadam, *Globalizing Women*; Salih, “Transnational Public Spheres”; Mojab, “Gender, Nation and Diaspora.”

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, “The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction,” in Risse et al., *The Power of Human Rights*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Checkel, *Ideas and International Political Change* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Risse-Kappen, “Introduction,” in Risse-Kappen, *Bringing Transnational Relations*, 23-26;

<sup>28</sup> Ruba Salih, “Transnational Public Spheres,” 54.

<sup>29</sup> Mojab, “The Politics of ‘Cyberfeminism,’” 50.

<sup>30</sup> Laurie Brand, *Citizens Abroad: Emigration and the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 7-8; 17-18.

<sup>31</sup> Moghadam, *Globalizing Women*.

<sup>32</sup> Ruba Salih, “Transnational Public Spheres,” 56.

<sup>33</sup> Moghadam, *Globalizing Women*, 4

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 5-7.

<sup>35</sup> Rasmussen, “Innocence Lost,” 934-35.

<sup>36</sup> Keck and Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders* 192-93.

---

<sup>37</sup> UNGA, A/RES/55/66: “Working towards the Elimination of Crimes against Women Committed in the Name of Honour,” 31 January 2001, <http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/b617b62bcb39ea6ec1256610002eb7a6/d71daccfe833c9a3c1256a7700542307?OpenDocument> (accessed 5 May 2010). UNGA, A/RES/57/179: “Working towards the Elimination of Crimes against Women Committed in the Name of Honour,” 30 January 2003, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/57/179&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/57/179&Lang=E) (Accessed 5 May 2010).

<sup>38</sup> A copy of the SBS is available at <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2003/12/20031212173802osnhojac0.1666071.html#axzz2RqgTEAoE> (accessed 21 September 2009).

<sup>39</sup> Rasmussen, “Innocence Lost,” 940.

<sup>40</sup> Fran Hazelton, “Land of Hope and Glitter: Fran Hazelton Examines the Fledgling Feminist Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *The Guardian*, 25 June 1992, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Mlodooh, “We Want to Be Remembered,” 73-74.

<sup>42</sup> Mojab, “The Politics of ‘Cyberfeminism,’” 47.

<sup>43</sup> Fischer-Tahir, “Competition, Cooperation and Resistance,” 1383.

<sup>44</sup> This also included rape victims. Shahrzad Mojab, “No ‘Safe Haven’ Violence against Women in Iraqi Kurdistan,” in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, ed. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 120.

<sup>45</sup> The destruction of agriculture affected women even more negatively than men. Women in rural Kurdistan were integral to the work force in the agricultural sector. In the towns and cities, working women were deprived of access to most occupations and working women were stigmatized and were sometimes even attacked. The most extreme example is that of Anfal

---

wives, who were often compelled to find jobs due to the absence of male providers and government support. See Mlodoch, "We Want to Be Remembered," 73-75.

<sup>46</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 24-25.

<sup>47</sup> WADI Foundation, *Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan: an Empirical Study by WADI* (Frankfurt: WADI, 2010), 12-17.

<sup>48</sup> Mojab and Gorman, "Dispersed Nationalism," 74.

<sup>49</sup> In its early days in power, the Ba‘th government enacted the 1958 constitution, which criminalized, at least nominally, honor killings. Lucy Brown and David Romano, "Women in Post-Saddam Iraq: One Step Forward or Two Steps Back?" *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 3 (2006): 54.

<sup>50</sup> These were Narmin Othman and Nesreen Berwari, who held the Women's Affairs and Public Works portfolios respectively. The Iraqi National Accord nominated Leila ‘Abd al-Latif as Minister of Labor.

<sup>51</sup> Egypt is also notable example for this. See Kathleen Howard-Merriam, "Guaranteed Seats for Political Representation of Women: The Egyptian Example," *Women and Politics* 10, no. 1 (1990): 17-42. See also Aili Mari Tripp and Alice Kang, "The Global Impact of Quotas: On the Fast Track to Increased Female Legislative Representation," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 338-61.

<sup>52</sup> Fischer-Tahir, "Competition, Cooperation and Resistance," 1385.

<sup>53</sup> Rasmussen offers Egypt as another example in which public pressure has hindered the government from taking steps against FGM on the grounds of religions and tradition. See "Innocence Lost," 943, 960.

<sup>54</sup> Mojab, "No 'Safe Haven,'" 124.



- 
- <sup>55</sup> Surma Hamid, "The Moon Rises After Sunset," in *Fire, Snow and Honey: Voices from Kurdistan*, ed. Ginna Lennox (Rushcutters Bay: Halstead Press, 2001).
- <sup>56</sup> Mojab, "Gender, Nation and Diaspora," 122.
- <sup>57</sup> Khalid Khayati, "From Victim Diaspora to Transnational Citizenship" (PhD diss., Linköping University, 2008).
- <sup>58</sup> Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 122-23.
- <sup>59</sup> Mojab, "Gender, Nation and Diaspora," 124; See also Mojab and Gorman, "Dispersed Nationalism."
- <sup>60</sup> Mojab, "The Politics of 'Cyberfeminism.'"
- <sup>61</sup> *Khabat*, "al-Mar'a al-Kurdiyya fi al-mu'tamar al-'alami al-rabi' li-huquq al-mar'a fi Bekin," 5 November 1995, no page number.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>63</sup> Ann-Catrin Emanuelsson, "Shall We Return, Stay or Circulate? Political Changes in Kurdistan and Transnational Dynamics in Kurdish Refugee Families in Sweden," *Journal of Migration and Refugee Issues* 4, no. 3 (2008): 148-49.
- <sup>64</sup> Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), 55-120.
- <sup>65</sup> Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi State*, 76-79.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., 77.
- <sup>67</sup> See, for example, Runak Faraj Rahim and Hana Shwan, *Statistics on Violence Used against Women*, trans. from Kurdish into English by Tanea Abdulkhadir (Sulaymaniya: Women's Media and Education Center, 2004).

---

<sup>68</sup> Nicholas Birch, "Ancient Practice Still a Threat to Iraqi Women," *Washington Times*, 22 August 2005, A15.

<sup>69</sup> WADI, "Female Genital Mutilation."

<sup>70</sup> Fischer-Tahir, "Competition, Cooperation and Resistance," 1383.

<sup>71</sup> Asuda, "Profile of Asuda," 3 July 2006, <http://www.asuda.org>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>73</sup> KHRP, *Charter for the Rights and Freedoms of Women in the Kurdish Regions and Diaspora* (London, KHRP, 2004), 11.

<sup>74</sup> Mojab, "Gender, Nation and Diaspora," 126.

<sup>75</sup> Tahir-Fischer, "Competition, Cooperation and Resistance," 1390.

<sup>76</sup> Azeez Mahmood, "Call to Strengthen Laws Protecting Women," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 22 April 2010, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/call-strengthen-laws-protecting-women> (accessed 18 January 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>79</sup> As she is described in one report. See Samira Kanun, "Akhbar wa-nishatat ittihad al-nisa' al-Ashuri," *Zahrira News Network*, <http://www.zahrira.net/?p=1299> (accessed 10 November 2009).

<sup>80</sup> Shahbal Ma'ruf Dizayi, *al-'Unf didda al-mar'a: dirasa qanuniyya muqarina fi al-qanun al-duwali al-'am wa-l-qanun al-'am al-dakhili* (Erbil: Aras, 2007).

<sup>81</sup> Nazand Begikhani, Aisha Gil, Gill Hague, and Kathwer Ibraheem, *Final Report: Honour-Based Violence (HBV) and Honour-Based Killings in Iraqi Kurdistan and in the Kurdish Diaspora in the UK* (Centre for Gender Violence Research, University of Bristol, Roehampton University, in partnership with Kurdish Women Rights' Watch: London, November 2010), 18 (page 13 in the Kurdish version).

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>84</sup> Tanyel B. Taysi, *Eliminating Violence against Women: Perspectives on Honor-Related Violence in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, Sulaymaniya Governorate* (Sulaymaniya: UNAMI and Asuda, 2009), 8-9.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>86</sup> Taysi and Minwalla, "Structural Violence against Women," 87-88.

<sup>87</sup> Cyrille Cartier, "Iraqi Kurdish Women Voice Hopes for Constitution," *Women's eNews*, 25 April 2006, [www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2717](http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2717).

<sup>88</sup> Fischer-Tahir, "Competition, Cooperation and Resistance," 1391; Al-Ali and Pratt, "Between Nationalism," 341.

<sup>89</sup> WADI, "Female Genital Mutilation."

<sup>90</sup> As referred to by Barham Salih, the KRG's prime minister, in the launching of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2010. KRG's official website [henceforth KRG], "Kalimat ra 'is hukumat al-iqlim fi al-yawm al-'alami li-munahadat al-'unf didda al-mar'a," 25 November 2010. <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?lngnr=14&smap=01020100&rn=274&anr=37912> (accessed 2 February 2010).

<sup>91</sup> Ako Muhammed, "KRG Criticizes UNAMI Report," *The Kurdish Globe*, 9 January 2010; Mohammed Salih, "UN Human-Rights Report Sparks Uproar in Kurdistan," *Inter Press Service*, 8 May 2007.

<sup>92</sup> Taysi, "Eliminating Violence," 44.

<sup>93</sup> Al-Ali and Pratt, *What Kind of Liberation*, 142-44.

<sup>94</sup> Mojab and Gorman, "Dispersed Nationalism," 74-75.

- 
- <sup>95</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Political Changes Reduce Kurdistan Honor Killings," *Women's eNews*, 7 July 2002, <http://oldsite.womensenews.org/oldsite/article.cfm/dyn/aid/964/context/archive> (accessed 3 February 2010).
- <sup>96</sup> Fawzi al-'Atroushi, "Hawla qatl al-nisa' wa-l-ihtilal al-idari fi Kurdistan al-'Iraq," *KRG*, 7 July 2007, <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?lngnr=14&smap=01010400&rn=84&an=18908> (accessed 3 February 2010).
- <sup>97</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>98</sup> KRG, "Sultat Iqlim Kurdistan tuhawilu tahjim 'amaliyyat al-qatl al-murtabata bi-ma yu'raf bi-ghasl al-'ar," 4 July 2007, <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.asp?rn=81&lngnr=14&smap=01010100&an=18840> (accessed 10 February 2010).
- <sup>99</sup> Shivan al-Sheekh 'Alo, "Jaraim ghasl al-'ar fi Iqlim Kurdistan... wa-ma dawr hukumat al-iqlim ittijahiha," *KRG*, 14 July 2007, <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?a=19064&l=14&r=84&s=010000> (accessed 10 February 2010).
- <sup>100</sup> HRW, *They Took Me and Told Me Nothing: Female Genital Mutilation in Iraqi Kurdistan* (New York: HRW, 2010), 40.
- <sup>101</sup> Begikhani et al., "Final Report."
- <sup>102</sup> Al-Sabah al-Jadid, "al-Barlaman al-Kurdistani yastadifu 'ashra wuzara' li-muhajaat al-'unf didda al-mar'a," July 5, 2007.
- <sup>103</sup> Interview with Zangana, in Begikhani et al., *Final Report*, 63.
- <sup>104</sup> See Qassim Khidir, "Prisoners in Kurdistan Given a Second Chance," *The Kurdish Globe*, 21 June 2007.

---

<sup>105</sup> Ma‘d Fayyad, “Iftitah awal markaz li-mu‘alajat kadaia al-‘unf didda al-nisa’ fi Kurdistan al-‘Iraq,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 January 2008.

<sup>106</sup> HRW, *They Took Me and Told Me Nothing*, 68.

<sup>107</sup> Salih Waladbagi, “Anti-Domestic Violence Law in Kurdistan,” *The Kurdish Globe*, 3 April 2012.

<sup>108</sup> “KRG to Enforce Laws Protecting Women from Violence,” *The Globe*, 17 June 2008.

<sup>109</sup> Waladbagi, “Anti-Domestic Violence Law in Kurdistan.”

<sup>110</sup> The Kurdish Globe, “US Representative Highlights KRG's Efforts on Women's Rights,” 31 March 2012.

<sup>111</sup> AFP, “Women's Rights Law no Match for Kurdistan Tradition,” 18 June 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Taysi and Minwalla, “Structural Violence,” 88.